ASIANS CITE THOSE WHO DO THE BALANCING ACT

By ZAN DUBIN

If Sumi Haru had her way, there would be no need for the Assn. of Asian/Pacific American Artists (AAPAA).

As it is, the nonprofit watchdog organization will hold its first media awards dinner Monday night to recognize organizations and individuals who have helped portray Asian/Pacific Americans on the screen and stage as full-dimensional human beings, not stereotypes.

The awards dinner will be held at the Hollywood Palace. Tritia Toyota will act as mistress of ceremonies. Among the scheduled presenters are Ed Asner, Eileen Brennan, Robert Ito and Pat Morita.

The production companies of such television series as "St. Elsewhere" and "Trapper John, M.D." and the films "The Killing Fields" and "The Karate Kid" will be among those honored.

"AAPAA is trying to create opportunities for Asian/Pacific American artists both in front of the scenes and behind the scenes, and to find a balanced image on camera or on the stage for Asian artists," said Haru, a producer at KTLA-TV who helped to found the association nine years ago and who is the awards event's executive producer.

Media representation of Asian/Americans is predominantly negative and stereotypical, she said. "Right now, almost every major cop show or action show has had Asian gangs in them, and there is very little reference to people...

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like March Fong Eu, California's secretary of state.

Actress Beulah Quo, the association's first vice president, objected to a recent PBS series ("Dr. Who") that used words like "Chinee" and "Chinaman." "We find that kind of language in present-day America is very offensive and certainly out of place," she said.

"One of AAPAA's goals is not only to create opportunities," Quo continued, "but to create better opportunities for Asian artists. Frequently when Hollywood won't even consider an Asian actor for a leading role, we hear that the Asian is not 'bankable.' I would like to refute that statement. The work of Pat Morita and Dr. Haing Ngor, who were nominated for best supporting actor in "The Karate Kid" and "The Killing Fields," has made those films what they are, and those films are bringing in box-office dollars—because those actors are 'bankable.' So Hollywood has a lesson to learn, I'm afraid.

"There is also a double standard in the industry," she added. "They'll use whites and tape up their eyes to play Asians, but they have yet to use an Asian to play a major white role," excepting Kim Miyori, she said, who played Dr. Wendy Armstrong in "St. Elsewhere."

(NBC and Mary Tyler Moore Productions will receive an award Monday for their "St. Elsewhere" series. The role of Dr. Armstrong was written for a "perky redhead," said actress and AAPAA board member Pat Li, and when Miyori was hired, producers didn't change the character's name.)

"We're allowed to play foreigners," Quo said, "but we're never considered as characters from America's mainstream," even though most Asian/American actors, including herself, Haru and Li, were born in America, she added.

"We have Asian judges, lawyers, morticians, grocery clerks and people in every walk of life," Li said, "and we've melded very much into American society, yet you don't see that on TV or on the screen."

All three women have had numerous experiences playing stereotypic roles, swathed in tight-fitting Chinese silk and speaking pigeon-English.

"I have no accent that I can determine, and I spent a whole career playing 'Japanese mamasans and geisha girls,'" said Li, who was instrumental 20 years ago in founding the East West Players, the highly regarded repertory company.

"I've noticed a very subtle change when I audition now—we're not required to speak in funny accents, but the words and meanings are the same," she said.

Much of the continuing stereotyping is unintentional, Quo said, and all three women agreed that producers and directors are often receptive to script changes. (AAPAA personnel also act as industry consultants and the organization performs "image-spoof" community theatrical productions.)

"It starts with the written word," Quo said. "We need to develop an awareness and sensitivity among writers that it's OK to use people of color for all kinds of roles."

"It will be nice when this organization doesn't have to exist," Haru said. "Then we'll be up there with the Tony winners, with the Golden Globe and the Academy Award winners."